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Does quality drive employee satisfaction in the UK learning sector?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide empirical evidence to assess the nature and extent of the link between employee satisfaction and organisational performance.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines the link between staff satisfaction and organisational performance, presenting findings from 21 colleges of Further Education that have participated in both a survey of staff satisfaction (covering over 2,600 staff from these colleges) and in a diagnostic benchmarking exercise using the "Learning PROBE" methodology.

Findings – The results suggest that whilst each of the measured aspects of work are regarded as being important by a majority of survey respondents, the level of "satisfaction" displayed in each of these attributes is indicated by only a minority of those surveyed. The findings support the existence of a link between staff satisfaction and organisational excellence. Staff satisfaction levels are most strongly associated with the leadership and service processes indices, and even more so with the overall organisational diagnosis. This suggests that colleges that are implementing "good practices" covering a range of managerial aspects, and who are achieving corresponding organisational results, are likely to be closer to satisfying their staff. Practices relating to people, performance management and organizational results also show association with staff's satisfaction gap, although not as significantly as

above. The results suggest an holistic approach to implementing business practices appears to be more effective than concentrating only on deploying good practices in only a single area of the managerial process.

Originality/value – The value of the paper is to the UK Further Education Sector in that it identifies those organisational practices, which improved, can in combination address to some extent the work satisfaction levels of their employees.

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Introduction

Quality improvement is high on the agenda of the United Kingdom's public services, and the education, learning and skills sector is no exception. The general drive for improvement has been strongly influenced by the central government, largely through the introduction of its various performance initiatives, such as "Best Value Reviews" and "Comprehensive Performance Assessments", and by increases in stakeholder awareness and expectations. There has been much encouragement for the public services to introduce formal quality frameworks in order to enhance organisational performance (Sanderson, 1996). McAdam *et al.* (2002) reported that within the public sector the "Business Excellence Model" (BEM) and "Investors in People" (IIP) were considered by managers as offering an appropriate set of models and performance indicators that have relevance to the sector. There was also an indication that various models, particularly those cited above, were being used in combination to address both operational and strategic issues. The UK government through the Cabinet Office (2001) have identified BEM, IIP, Charter Mark, and ISO9000 as the four main quality schemes being implemented across local government and were encouraging organisations across the sector to use one or more of these tools in combination. Interestingly, Bowden (2000) commented that both BEM and IIP have been revised in recent times to increase their emphasis upon cultural and motivational issues, including a focus on satisfaction levels among employees.

In terms of the public sector, Davis (1998) reported that a lack of awareness had existed until the late 1990s regarding the potential scope of benchmarking in local government. Within this sector, low levels of aspiration restricted the organisations' potential to gain from the process and formal evaluation across the sector was limited. Davis commented that whilst benchmarking was maturing, its public value was limited, and at the time through a combination of factors, development was being inhibited. Moreover, Ball *et al.* (2000) commented that benchmarking in local government was seen as a management tool which was being implemented to address two

separate issues: a way of challenging sectoral processes and as a method of central government control, primarily in terms of implementing financial constraints. Bowerman *et al.* (2002) argued that, in its evolution, benchmarking more frequently responded to the requirements of the central government than those of the implementing local authority and was typically used for defensive purposes rather than performance gains. These authors view benchmarking's development and application as being quite separate to its equivalent within the private sector.

From a different perspective, the belief that employee satisfaction is an important consideration in relation to the delivery of high-quality services (and products) has long been embedded in theories, models and writings on the themes of quality improvement and organisational excellence. Deming (1993), for example, saw "Joy in work" as an end in itself, and inextricably linked with effectiveness of the system. Silvestro (2002) suggests that the American TQM "gurus" are "…unanimous and unequivocal in the view that increasing process ownership and job satisfaction will yield returns in both quality and productivity", while Peters and Austin (1986) stress the theme of "ownership", arguing that employees with a feeling of ownership with respect to either their organisation or role are more likely to provide better levels of performance.

An explicit link between employee satisfaction and loyalty, and profitability, was suggested by the architects of the "service-profit chain" (Heskett *et al.,* 1994), who argued that satisfied employees create value in the services provided to customers, which in turn, has the potential to lead to customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty. They see that effective support mechanisms and policies internal to their organisation as being key drivers of employee satisfaction.

Whilst the logic embodied in the service-profit chain has gained widespread acceptance (Wirtz, 2003; Meyer *et al.*, 1999), some authors regard it as unproven or as an over-simplification. Sivestro and Cross (2000), for example, argue that the drivers of business success are more complex than the chain suggests, while Silvestro (2002) calls into question what he sees as a key assumption within TQM, HRM and service management literature, and a

component of what he calls "the received wisdom", namely, the link between employee satisfaction and loyalty, service productivity and profitability.

An interesting question that arises relates to the extent to which quality-focused approaches implemented by organisations impact upon the work satisfaction of their employees. Lam (1995) identified that TQM programs improve co-worker relationships and knowledge of supervision, but they can make work more demanding in terms of volume, skill and accuracy, thus enhancing some but not all aspects of employee satisfaction. From Lam's study, the overall result was to find no net increase in staff satisfaction or personal effectiveness. In a higher educational context, Hart and Shoolbred (1993) identified that although quality systems and measurements are discussed widely, little has been said about the employee working experience within organisations employing such frameworks. Rowley (1996) examined a variety of factors that impact upon staff motivation in this sector together with strategies for motivation, concluding that motivation is key to the culture of quality and as movement within the sector is towards quality enhancement, employee motivation will increase in importance. Rowley also concluded that the most important issue connected to staff motivation is the psychological contract between staff and management. Powell (2002) considered the flattening of structures within the education sector, but has concluded that culture change must be addressed before restructuring in order to maximize the empowerment of employees, recognising that motivation and empowerment are central to education and structures need to be addressed in terms of their empowering or restricting effects. In the wider service context, Jarrar and Zairi (2002) commented that employee empowerment is still very much in its infancy and organisations are still unwilling to pass on power to their employees. Oshagbemi (2001) has identified a number of personal characteristics amongst academic staff that combine to explain their levels of satisfaction pertaining to their managers and has concluded that in order to increase levels of employee satisfaction, managers within the academic sector need regular development programs to enhance their managerial effectiveness.

In summary, the literature review suggests the hypothesis that employee satisfaction and loyalty drive service performance has gained widespread acceptance, influencing managers, consultants and academics. In turn, this has influenced organisational assessments and improvement strategies so that they may impact upon employee satisfaction. Questions have been raised, however, about the extent to which this theory is supported by empirical evidence, and whether the link between employee satisfaction and organisational performance is as direct and as straightforward as we have been led to believe.

This paper examines the link between employee satisfaction and organisational practices and performance in a specific setting. More than 2,600 staff, working in 21 colleges located throughout England who participated in an in-depth diagnostic benchmarking exercise using the "Learning PROBE" methodology, also responded to a staff satisfaction survey, thus creating the opportunity to identify and measure the extent of the links between organisational excellence and employee satisfaction. The opportunity to explore these inter-relationships in the context of a sizeable sample of colleges and their staff therefore, has the potential to make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge in this important area. To report upon a major benchmarking exercise within the public sector, with implications both at the micro and macro level potentially offers a major breakthrough from the sectorial limitations identified by the authors earlier in the paper as well as providing the empirical evidence to uphold or reject the hypotheses centred around the association between organisational excellence and employee satisfaction.

Background and research methodology

The post-16 sector of UK education has undergone substantial recent change. The central government has stressed the need for quality improvement in the learning sector. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC, 1993) introduced self-assessment into the sector in England in September 1993 and it is now a core component of the colleges' management. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which took over the

work of the FEFC in April 2002, has continued this process, providing the sector with a number of supporting publications, including *Self Assessment and Development Plans* (LSC, 2001a), which defines the roles of self-assessment and development planning as being integral part to the organisation's management, whilst *A Guide for Providers on Self-assessment and Development Planning* (LSC, 2001b) suggests that the main role for self-assessment is self-improvement.

At the end of the 1990s, the college sector had experience of applying metric benchmarks, but had yet to deploy a diagnostic or process benchmarking tool. A decision was made through partnerships involving the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) to either develop a new diagnostic benchmarking tool specific to the learning sector or to modify one that was readily available.

Learning PROBE is the (modified) diagnostic benchmarking tool, adapted from the original work of London Business School and IBM consulting (Hanson *et al.*, 1994; Voss *et al.*, 1997) by the LSDA and the Centre for Business Excellence (CfBE), a research centre based in Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. The PROBE tools measure practice and performance in key areas of organisational activity, helping the organisation to understand its own areas of strength, areas with scope for improvement, and how its practices and results compare with those of other organisations. This benchmarking exercise provided a number of colleges with their first experience of diagnostic benchmarking, and has given the LSDA an opportunity to identify, on behalf of the FE colleges, sector wide strengths and limitations in terms of management, deployment of good practices and performance achievements. The LSDA's remit and activities also extend to designing and implementing surveys of staff and learner satisfaction, providing opportunities for complementary insights to corroborate, challenge or refine the PROBE findings.

At the micro-level, the research process undertaken within the participating colleges can be described as "action research" in that both the deployment of the diagnostic benchmarking tool within the colleges and the administration of

an employee satisfaction survey were intended primarily as aids to the colleges' management teams as they reflect upon their organisations' current status and plan for further developments. This involves some of the key features of Lewin (1948) approach to action research, summarised by Abraham (1997), where the features include the research being focused on real problems, action being taken to redress problems and professional researchers collaborating with the organisations who are the research subject. Dick (2002) describes this methodology as having two aims: action to bring about changes in a community or organisation and research to increase understanding for both researcher and client. In this case, such research was based on the individual college, where critical self-evaluation of its practices and performance indicators was undertaken and subsequently validated independently against the available evidence and compared relative to the sector, thus identifying strengths and challenges and agreeing upon strategies for improvement.

At the aggregate level, which more explicitly underpins the work presented in this paper, the aim of the research was to gather data from a large number of colleges which could be analysed collectively in order to understand patterns and inter-relationships which could inform policy and thinking across the Further Education Sector and beyond. This represents a quantitative approach to research, based on sector wide data, which has been used in the development of this paper to test the key hypothesis set out in the literature review, that various associations potentially exist between organisational excellence and employee satisfaction.

Some work has been undertaken to investigate the reliability of diagnostic benchmarking as a research method, and the robustness of the data that the technique gathers. The Made in Europe study (Hanson *et al.*, 1994) identified a tendency for stronger performers to self-assess somewhat pessimistically, while conversely those who are furthest from world-class standards tend to be a little optimistic. Robson and Yarrow (2000) identified a number of issues concerning data validity and consistency, concluding that on balance the diagnostic benchmarking approach, properly managed, can provide reliable

data and generate valuable lessons for a sector, region, or other corporate community of practice. The issue of data reliability within, and consistency across, the participating colleges was addressed by them being led through the benchmarking process by a facilitator within the environment of a diagnostic workshop. The facilitator's role was to evaluate the college team's self-assessment against available evidence within the organisation, and subject to discussion and consensus, provide a range of amended measures and relevant written feedback (Appleby *et al.*, 2002).

The overall findings relating to the sector are described by both Appleby *et al.* (2002) and Owen *et al.* (2003). These results confirm that high levels of practice implementation do lead to high levels of operational and business performance, and areas of strength and opportunities for improvement that invite attention on a sector-wide basis have been identified. Twenty-one of the colleges benchmarked through Learning PROBE also participated in a staff satisfaction survey, offering the authors a useful opportunity to determine the extent to which key findings from the institutional survey map onto the perceptions of the staff employed within them. The large number of participants (more than 2,600) gives this associated staff survey a high level of credibility.

Overview of the analysis

From the benchmarking data, five PROBE indices are examined in detail: leadership, service processes, people, performance management and results, each assessed through an aggregate index of scores assigned to a number of connected business practices or aspects of performance. The outputs of the analysis are categorized into three groups:

1. an index score below 60 represents practices or results which at face value are priorities for attention;
2. an index score between 60 and 70 is labelled as "good"; and
3. an index score of 70 indicates practice or results that can be considered to be moving towards excellence.

Colleges can be categorized as "winning" (world-class and potential winners, which have high practice and performance indices), "promising" (high practice, but low performance), "vulnerable" (low practice, but high performance) and "room for improvement" (low practice and performance indices). Each of the four categories of organisation has been covered amongst the colleges considered within this paper.

The staff survey invited staff to indicate their level of satisfaction with respect to a wide range of aspects of their working life and attributes that their college might display, by indicating their level of agreement with a series of "positive" statements using a five-point Likert scale strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. In order to determine a measure of staff's priorities, they were also asked to indicate the level of "importance" that they would attach to each of the 38 attributes, again using the scale above. The gap between "importance" and "satisfaction" has been determined for each of the 38 work-related attributes, which is referred in this paper as the staff's "satisfaction gap". For example, if they strongly agree about an attribute in terms of importance, but were neutral in terms of satisfaction, the "satisfaction gap" would have a value of two (i.e. five minus three) on this scale. The 38 attributes cover six key areas, as shown in Table I. The survey respondents consisted of:

- per cent aged under 30, 22 per cent 30-40, 37 per cent 41-50 and 32 per cent aged 51 and over;
- per cent of respondents were female and 35 per cent male;
- per cent came from ethnic minority groups;
- per cent were employed full time;
- per cent of respondents were in management posts; and
- per cent were employed in academic positions.

Whilst differences exist in employee perceptions in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, job status, managerial status and job function, they have not been reported in this paper. Instead, the focus of the paper is on the associations of employee perception with the implementation of "good practices" and resultant organisational performance of the employing college. It should be

emphasised that "organisational performance" is assessed within the PROBE benchmarking process through examination of a broad and balanced basket of measures of external outcomes and internal performance indicators.

Given the size of the sample, each of the key sub-groups listed have been represented in the sample by a meaningful number of employees. To consider the overall results, percentage frequency distributions (focusing on the extent of the overall negative and positive responses for each of the 38 staff satisfaction attributes) and weighted scores have been used. To look at the differences between importance and agreement for each measure across the sector, and the extent of any association between staff importance and their satisfaction gap with the key PROBE indices, relevant non-parametric tests have been applied. Where significant results have been identified from these tests, these are indicated, and in turn explained, at the 5, 1, or 0.1 per cent significance levels.

Results

The staff satisfaction survey involved staff from a large number of colleges (Owen and Davies, 2003). Table I summarises the findings from staff of the 21 colleges that participated in both Learning PROBE benchmarking and the staff satisfaction survey. The percentage of negative respondents is those who either strongly disagree or disagree with the statement, and likewise, the positive percentage is those who strongly agree or agree with the statement. The level of negativity and positivity has been indicated for each statement with respect to both importance and satisfaction.

Most of the attributes included in the staff survey are regarded as important by a clear majority of the respondents, particularly in the areas of customers, the college and communication. These areas tend to focus on work related issues with either an external or organisational focus, whereas areas with a more personal focus (my own role and staff of the college) are still regarded as important, but relatively less so sector wide.

Interestingly, the three aspects displaying the lowest importance ratings across the sample are opportunity for progression, loyalty to the college and staff being encouraged to take risks.

It is clear from Table I that the level of importance attached to each of the 38 attributes considered is greater than the corresponding levels of satisfaction. In almost all cases, satisfaction has a weighted score of below 3 (weighted using 1=strongly disagree up to 5=strongly agree). Moreover, for each attribute, the difference between importance and satisfaction cited by each survey respondent is significant at the 0.1 per cent level, indicating that for each attribute, the college staff are displaying a "satisfaction" gap. The gap between staff's rating of the importance of each attribute, and their satisfaction with the extent of its implementation or realization, has been examined and taken to be a measure of this "satisfaction gap". Figure 1 shows the extent of the gaps for the 38 attributes considered, comparing a weighted score for each attribute in terms of its importance with a weighted score relating to satisfaction.

The two areas of measurement which consider organisational characteristics, style of senior management and communication, display particularly low levels of staff satisfaction regarding the level of effectiveness with which these aspects are being implemented within their college. Only one attribute from these two areas has a weighted score for satisfaction exceeding three and the satisfaction gaps are large across all of the parameters in these areas, identifying these as the areas in which the college staff are relatively least satisfied. Staff have pinpointed effectiveness of management decision making and being able to say what they think as aspects that are of particular concern. This negativity towards senior management contradicts the impact senior management commitment can potentially have on organizational excellence (Prabhu and Robson, 2000b) and the latter characteristic also identifies the extent of the work needing to be done relating to employee empowerment, upholding the findings of Jarrar and Zairi (2002) and Powell (2002).

The staff of the college is a less clear-cut area, although relatively high levels of satisfaction are reported regarding staff working well in teams and staff commitment to quality improvement. In contrast, greater levels of absolute and relative (as indicated by the "gap") satisfaction exist with respect to staff views being sought and considered, involvement in planning improvements and setting targets, shared goals between academic and support staff, and most of all, job security. The latter point concurs with one of the key findings from International Survey Research Ltd (1997), which identified that job security was one of the main drivers in the downturn of employee morale amongst UK workers in the 1990s. The three areas described so far each have a majority of measures with a weighted satisfaction score below three, identifying these as the areas in absolute terms as requiring the greatest attention.

My own role is a more positively-rated area, with more aspects displaying greater satisfaction than dissatisfaction; and customers displays a similar profile, although large satisfaction gaps exist in terms of how the colleges act upon feedback and how effectively they deal with complaints. It appears that the colleges are doing a good job of encouraging feedback from their customers, at least in the view of their staff, but a much poorer job of exploiting the feedback's messages as drivers for improvement.

In the area the college, there is a high level of relative satisfaction about the implementation of equal opportunities, but dissatisfaction and relatively large satisfaction gaps relating to adequate workspaces, adequate resources and genuine employer care about staff welfare.

The data have been tested to identify the extent of any association between staff importance, satisfaction and satisfaction gaps with the key benchmarking indices. Little association exists between the level of management practices implemented by the colleges or the organisational results they have achieved and the level of importance attached by the college staff to the particular aspects of their working life.

The indices relating to leadership and service processes display no significant association with the levels of staff importance attached to any of the 38 aspects considered in the staff survey. Some associations are apparent between the people index and several of the parameters – staff from colleges with a score in the higher bands (i.e. an index of 60 or more) attach more importance to the significant questions compared with those staff from colleges in the lower score band. The same patterns of association exist for performance management and results. It seems that in colleges in which people management and performance management are strengths, staff attach more importance to factors such as equal opportunities and availability of information about the college. This could be interpreted as a manifestation of greater identification with those colleges that are managing these aspects better.

Where associations exist in terms of the overall benchmarking diagnosis, it is staff from "vulnerable" colleges who attach the greatest importance to the significant questions. Staff from "promising" colleges also attach greatest important to adequate workspaces.

In summary, these results suggest that the extent and effectiveness of strategies in place and the organisational success of the college in themselves do not strongly influence the levels of importance attached to aspects of their working life by college staff.

In contrast, Table II shows that large numbers of significant associations have been identified between the benchmarking indices and the levels of staff satisfaction, and in turn, with the satisfaction gap between importance and satisfaction. With regard to the indices relating to leadership, service processes, people, performance management and result, the lower the index band of the college, the higher the satisfaction gap for the significant questions.

In terms of overall benchmarking diagnosis, the smallest gap for the significant questions can be found amongst staff from the "promising" colleges followed by those from colleges labelled as "winning". The only exception

relates to the question pertaining to staff workspaces, where the staff from the "promising" colleges shows the biggest gap between importance and agreement. Both of these categories of colleges have stronger levels of business practices, which suggest that colleges with well-implemented management systems that cover a wide range of managerial practices have a greater chance of moving towards satisfying their staff. In contrast, staff from colleges labelled as having "room for improvement" or as "vulnerable" show the biggest satisfaction gaps for the significant questions, the latter predominating in questions relating to staff of the college, style of senior management, communication and customers. These two groups of colleges have weaker implementation of practices and the statistically significant results suggest that the better the implementation of the good practices, or the better the organisational performance, the smaller the satisfaction gap.

Table II shows that the greatest levels of association with the various indices relate to measures corresponding to customers and the college, and the fewest associations relate to my own role and the staff of the college.

The most widespread levels of association with indicators of staff satisfaction relate to the PROBE indices leadership and service processes, and even more so to the overall diagnosis or outcome. This suggests that by implementing a broad range of good practices, and by achieving corresponding organisational results, the individual college is more likely to satisfy its staff with respect to a number of work-related issues. The indices relating to people, performance management and results also show association with the "satisfaction gap", although not in as widespread a way as the other benchmarking indices.

The areas showing the greatest "gap", style of senior management and communication, have component measures displaying the most statistically significant levels of association with the overall benchmarking diagnosis. The satisfaction gaps for parameters relating to style of senior management are also significantly associated with the colleges' implementation of practices relating to service processes, whilst the gap for the communication parameters are significantly associated with leadership practices. These

additional findings suggest that practices relating to specific aspects of the managerial process can be put in place to work towards satisfying staff in these particular areas. This is important given the findings of International Survey Research Ltd (1997), which identified that organisations emerging from a process of "transformational change" (which the FE colleges arguably are) are likely to show one of a number of improvements including an improvement in the rating of senior management's leadership and improvements in communications.

Most striking of all in Table II are the comprehensive associations between the staff satisfaction parameters relating to customers and all of the benchmarking indices. There is a clear message here – when a college's staff think highly of its approach to seeking and acting upon customer feedback and complaints, that college is likely to have well-implemented practices and to achieve strong results. To put this another way "high-achieving colleges are in touch with their customers, and responsive to the feedback their customers are providing".

It is also evident that the indices relating to performance management and results display fewest associations with staff satisfaction and the satisfaction gaps. It seems that the increased focus on managing the performance of colleges, while it may impact substantially upon other stakeholders, is having relatively little impact on the satisfaction of colleges' own staff.

Discussion of the findings

Across the FE college sector, there appears to be a consistent difference between the levels of importance placed on 38 attributes of their working life by a sample of staff and the corresponding level of agreement by the individual that their college has effectively implemented these attributes. In each case, a significant gap exists, suggesting that colleges have some way to go in terms of satisfying their staff. This gap appears to be across the board, covering aspects of work relating to the individual, the organisation and to the colleges' external stakeholders. Table III identifies areas displaying substantial satisfaction gaps for staff across the sample of colleges.

The results suggest that effective college leadership and good business operations play a part in helping to work towards satisfying their staff. Conversely, less impact upon meeting staff satisfaction is evident through explicit strategies relating to people, the measurement of organisational performance or the organisation's results themselves, whilst an holistic approach to implementing strategies and initiatives is apparently more effective than concentrating on any individual aspect of good practice, e.g. concentrating on business operations alone. That said, associations do exists between staff's "satisfaction gaps" and the college's attainment for certain measures of organisational practice or performance. The holistic approach to implementing practices and delivering organisational results helps colleges come closer to satisfying their staff, particularly in terms of senior management style, communication, the customers and the college.

However, the move towards organisational excellence helps reduce rather than eliminate this "satisfaction" gap, thus supporting the claim of a number of authors that the association between organisational excellence and employee satisfaction is not completely direct. This satisfaction gap obviously has an impact on staff enjoying their work and recommending the college as a place of employment. Whilst importance has only limited association with the extent to which staff claim to enjoy their work or would recommend their college as a place to work, the levels of satisfaction for all 38 measures have significant association with both of these factors. Moreover, the level of importance attached to all aspects of senior management style is negatively associated with levels of recommendation (i.e. those who attach less importance to these issues are more likely to recommend their college as a place to work), but recommendation is positively associated with the college's diagnosis relating to leadership, service processes, performance management and results. Finally, the most cited individual actions that staff would take to improve their working life are communication (20 per cent), management style (18 per cent) and resources (10 per cent), results that are consistent with the gaps reported earlier in the paper.

Staff satisfaction is an important issue across the public services in the UK and the education sector is no exception. In this study of the UK's further education colleges, Appleby *et al.* (2002) identified that the weaker colleges exhibit limitations in some of the following characteristics: job training, employee involvement, recognition and reward, flexibility and innovation; with employee involvement and recognition and reward being the most problematic sector wide. In regional studies across the wider service sector, Prabhu *et al.* (2001) identified that staff satisfaction was the performance outcome requiring greatest attention for each category of organisation, the public services included. Concentrating on the public sector alone, Prabhu *et al.* (2002) found that employee satisfaction is significantly lower for the public services compared with a number of key service groups from the private sector, although levels of employee satisfaction are significantly greater for the education-based organisations compared with their counterparts from the rest of the public services. This result concurs with those reported by Kristensen *et al.* (2002) from their Nordic 2001 study.

This paper has highlighted some issues where the gap between staff's ratings of importance and satisfaction can be bridged to some extent, and in turn, identified some areas which appear problematic for the whole sector. In both cases, indication has been given to the extent to which effective business practices and organisational results, in isolation or collectively, can help to bridge these gaps. However, it appears that business practices and organisational outcomes either individually or collectively will not completely address these differences, confirming the conclusions of Crow and Hartman (1995) that in terms of happiness and satisfaction, management have only a partial role in carrying out change, but do have the opportunity for some impact in this area.

Finally, the research method that underpins these findings uses a combination of diagnostic benchmarking and an extensive staff survey. This method appears to offer significant potential for further exploration of the mechanisms through which this and other sectors can continue to develop and improve. The two techniques have offered complementary "lenses" through which to

view both an organisation and its sector, and the combined effect provides a potentially powerful set of insights into the current status of the sector and its opportunities for improvement. Clearly, there is potential for greater benefit to be derived through longitudinal studies applying the same or similar approaches, through which the impact of various interventions and changes to practice could be evaluated over time, and this could be further enhanced by combining these results with additional data about the same organisations, such as data pertaining to customer and stakeholder satisfaction, learners' educational achievements and other quantitative results achieved by the colleges.
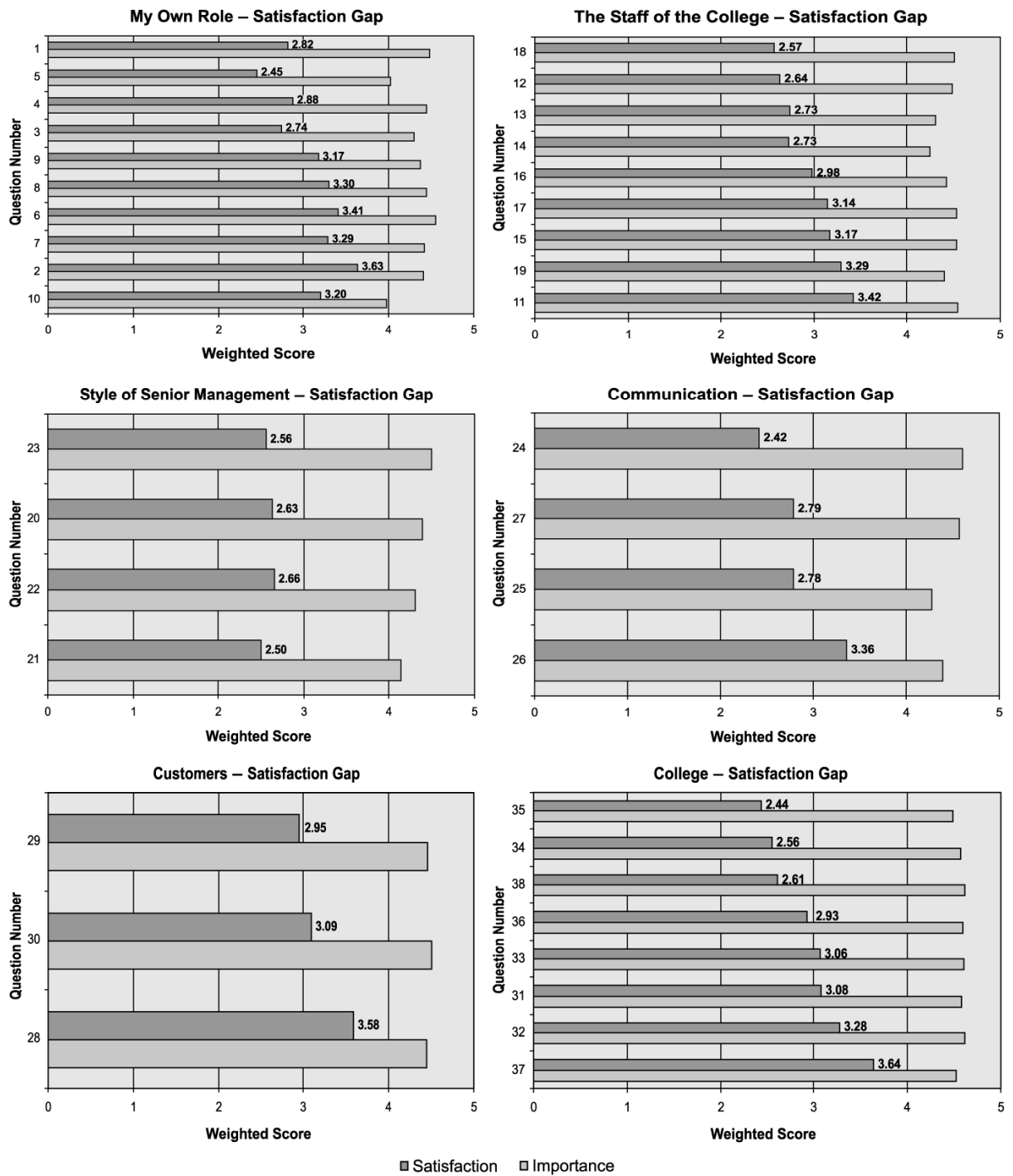
Figure 1*Gaps between staff's importance and satisfaction ratings – based on weighted scores*

	38 attributes reflecting aspects of staff's working life in their colleges	Weighted score	Importance Negative Percentage	Positive Percentage	Weighted score	Satisfaction Negative Percentage	Positive Percentage
	Area 1. My own role						
1	I feel valued in this organisation	4.48	5	89	2.82	38	29
2	I understand my role and contribution to goals of college	4.41	4	88	3.63	13	58
3	My views are sought and considered	4.31	4	85	2.74	41	27
4	I feel I have job security	4.45	5	87	2.88	36	34
5	There is opportunity for me to progress within organisation	4.02	9	72	2.45	51	19
6	My manager gives me the support I need to do my job effectively	4.55	4	92	3.41	25	52
7	I have the authority to do a good job	4.42	4	89	3.29	25	47
8	I get sufficient training to do my job effectively	4.44	4	89	3.30	23	46
9	I get feedback from my manager on the work I do	4.37	4	88	3.17	31	44
10	I am not thinking of leaving the college	3.98	8	67	3.20	31	44
	Area 2. The staff of the college						
11	Staff work well together in teams	4.54	3	91	3.42	19	49
12	Staff views are sought and considered	4.48	3	91	2.64	45	22
13	Staff are involved in planning improvements and setting targets	4.31	4	85	2.73	41	25
14	Academic and support staff have shared goals	4.25	4	81	2.73	40	23
15	Staff know what they are expected to do	4.53	3	92	3.17	24	39
16	Staff know how well they are performing	4.43	3	90	2.98	31	31
17	Staff receive appropriate training to make them effective in their job	4.53	3	92	3.14	26	39
18	Staff feel they have job security	4.51	3	89	2.57	47	22
19	Staff are committed to improving quality of all aspects of college	4.41	3	87	3.29	22	42
	Area 3. Style of senior management						
20	Staff are not afraid to say what they really think	4.39	3	89	2.63	45	23
21	Staff are encouraged to take risks or try new things without fear of failure	4.14	5	79	2.50	49	17
22	Management see complaints as opportunities for improvement rather than threats	4.31	4	85	2.66	43	24
23	Management are effective in making decisions about the organisation	4.50	3	89	2.56	47	20
	Area 4: Communication						
24	Communication is effective in the college	4.60	4	92	2.42	54	18
25	Information regarding strategic and operational goals/performance communicated effectively	4.28	4	84	2.78	38	25
26	Information about the college is readily available	4.40	3	87	3.36	20	47
27	Staff are given the information they need to do their job effectively	4.57	3	92	2.79	38	25
	Area 5: Customers						
28	The college encourages feedback from all its customers	4.45	3	89	3.58	13	55
29	The college acts upon feedback from all its customers	4.45	3	89	2.95	30	28
30	Complaints are dealt with effectively within the college	4.50	3	90	3.09	25	34
	Area 6: The college						
31	The college has a reputation for the quality of its provision	4.58	3	92	3.08	28	36
32	The college has a good future	4.61	3	92	3.28	20	41
33	Education is central to the management strategy of the college	4.60	3	92	3.06	32	38
34	Adequate resources are provided by the college for staff	4.57	3	93	2.56	49	22
35	Staff workspaces are adequate	4.49	4	91	2.44	53	22
36	Adequate resources are provided by the college for students	4.59	3	92	2.93	33	33
37	Equal opportunities are embedded into the culture of the college	4.52	4	89	3.64	15	59
38	The college genuinely cares about the welfare of its staff	4.62	3	93	2.61	46	24

Table I.
Staff satisfaction survey: levels of importance and satisfaction attached by aff to 38 attributes reflecting aspects of their working life

Table I *Staff satisfaction survey: levels of importance and satisfaction attached by staff to 38 attributes reflecting aspects of their working life*

		Leadership	Service processes	People	Performance management	Results	Overall PROBE outcome
My own role							
1	I feel valued in this organisation						•
2	I understand my role and contribution to goals of college						
3	My views are sought and considered	•	••				
4	I feel I have job security		•	••		•	•
5	There is an opportunity for me to progress within the organisation						
6	My manager gives me the support I need to do my job effectively						
7	I have the authority to do a good job						
8	I get sufficient training to do my job effectively						
9	I get feedback from my manager on the work I do						••
10	I am not thinking of leaving the college						•
The staff of the college							
11	Staff work well together in teams						
12	Staff views are sought and considered	•					
13	Staff are involved in planning improvements and setting targets	•	••				••
14	Academic and support staff have shared goals		•				•
15	Staff know what they are expected to do						•
16	Staff know how well they are performing		•				•
17	Staff receive appropriate training to make them effective in their job			••			
18	Staff feel they have job security			•			•
19	Staff are committed to improving the quality of all aspects of the college	••	•••	••	•	••	•••
Style of senior management							
20	Staff are not afraid to say what they really think		•				•••
21	Staff encouraged to take risks or try new things without fear of failure		••				••
22	Management see complaints as opp's for improvement rather than threats	•••	•••	•			•••
23	Management are effective in making decisions about the organisation	•	•••	•		•	••
Communication							
24	Communication is effective in the college	••	•		•	•	
25	Information regarding strategic and operational goals/performance communicated effectively		•				•••
26	Information about the college is readily available	•					•••
27	Staff are given the information they need to do their job effectively	••					•
Customers							
28	The college encourages feedback from all its customers	•••	•••	•••	••	••	•••
29	The college acts upon feedback from all its customers	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••
30	Complaints are dealt with effectively within the college	•••	•••	••	••	••	•••
College							
31	The college has a reputation for the quality of its provision	•••	•••			•••	•••
32	The college has a good future	••	••	•••	•	•••	•••
33	Education is central to the management strategy of the college						•
34	Adequate resources are provided by the college for staff	•	••		•		••
35	Staff workspaces are adequate		•				•••
36	Adequate resources are provided by the college for students	•	•••	••	•		•••
37	Equal opportunities are embedded into the culture of the college	•••	••	••			•••
38	The college genuinely cares about the welfare of its staff	•	••				•••

Table II *The "expectation gap" and its association with PROBE indices and overall outcome*

Area	Attributes displaying substantial satisfaction gaps
My own role	I feel valued in this organisation
	My views are sought and considered
	I feel I have job security
	There is an opportunity for me to progress within the organisation
The staff of the college	Staff feel they have job security
Style of senior management	Staff are not afraid to say what they really think
	Staff are encouraged to take risks or try new things without fear of failure
	Management see complaints as opportunities for improvement rather than as threats
	Management are effective in making decisions about the organisation
Communication	Communication is effective in the college
	Staff are given the information they need to do their job effectively
Customers	The college acts upon feedback from all its customers
	Complaints are dealt with effectively within the college
College	Adequate resources are provided by the college for staff
	Staff workspaces are adequate
	The college genuinely cares about the welfare of its staff

Table III *Substantial gaps between staff's ratings of importance and satisfaction*

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